

MAKING OF THE MILLION

JOHN ACKWORTH



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The Making of the Million

TALES of the TWENTIETH
CENTURY ♪
FUND ♪ ♪

By

John Ackworth

Author of "Clog Shop Chronicles," etc.

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Dedicated
WITH HONEST AND HEARTY ADMIRATION
TO
R. W. PERKS, ESQ., M.P.
THE ORIGINATOR OF
THAT UNIQUE AND WONDERFUL
MOVEMENT THE
WESLEYAN TWENTIETH CENTURY FUND

York, 1899

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THE GRAPES OF ESHCOL

I

THE GRAPES OF ESHCOL

THE Rev. Caesar Snape was ashamed of himself. This was not at all an uncommon state of mind for him to be in, for, as a matter of fact, he was oftener in that condition than any other, especially in a morning. He was a Wesleyan probationer, and lived alone in Mrs. Pendlebury's small upstairs front room, overlooking the parish church in the High Street, Muggridge.

He was the junior minister of the circuit, and though he had never heard of Muggridge until the Conference appointed him to it, he had since discovered that it was a very important place indeed; in fact, it would have been impossible for the Stationing Committee

to have selected a circuit that would not have assumed this aspect in the Rev. Caesar's eyes the moment he found himself allocated to it. It was generally regarded as a country circuit, but the new minister had soon discovered that it ought to be reckoned as at least a *semi*-suburban one, being only eleven miles as the crow flies from the head of the district.

"Fifty-nine trains pass through Muggridge every day," he used to say impressively to his friends; and he was surprised and a little hurt when somebody suggested that he might as well make it sixty, and some one else asked how many of the trains stopped.

Ministerially, the Rev. Caesar regarded himself as something of an impostor, whom the Muggridge Wesleyans had not yet found out. To his amazement they seemed quite resigned to him, and some of them even affected to enjoy his ministry.

What confiding, even credulous people the Wesleyans were! Taking everybody to be as high-minded and devoted as themselves, they had always insisted upon regarding him as a godly, self-sacrificing, and able young fellow,

and had insisted on his entering the ministry! Ah, they little knew! Every Methodist believed that no man was fit for the ministry who wanted to be in it, and he had been literally consumed with ambition for the sacred office. The "call" only came to those who were in a high state of grace, and he had desired it whilst he was still a hardened sinner. (A surreptitious smoker of cigarettes and a reader of mild fiction.)

A true minister was always oppressed with an awful sense of the responsibilities of his office, and would gladly lay it down if he dared, but he was so filled with unholy pride and ambition that he could not think life worth living apart from it. An essential qualification for the ministerial office was the possession of courage to say everything he felt he ought to say, and he was, and always had been in these respects, a miserable coward. Somebody would find him out some day, and then what a revelation there would be!

And now this "Million Scheme" had come and it was just such a big, grand enterprise as his soul delighted in; and he had been to the

preliminary District Committee in place of his super, who was ill, and had come back the night before full of enthusiasm, and eager for the next day to arrive, that he might set to work and rouse the sympathies of his people.

But now it was morning, and in the dim December daylight his dreams of the night before looked Utopian and ridiculous, and he felt a miserable, cowardly feeling rising within him, which tempted him to wish that the great effort had never been heard of.

The Muggridge circuit was not like any other ; his people were very good—wonderful people, in fact, when he came to think of it—but not exactly in that way. Ah ! he understood now why some of his ministerial brethren had looked surprised when he had spoken so enthusiastically of his flock ; they knew them better than he did. Two guineas per member at least ! The thing was preposterous !

The super was an invalid, and the initiation of this great scheme in the circuit would rest almost entirely with himself. He could not give much himself, and he had never in his life done any begging of this kind before ; the

whole thing would be a fiasco, and the Muggidge circuit, his first circuit, would be disgraced in the eyes of the whole Connexion.

And then he pulled himself up. Yes, it was just like him! A minister's work was to make light of difficulties and show his people how they might overcome them, and here was he shrinking like a timid schoolgirl at the very first serious task he had ever been called upon to face. "Caesar Snape, you're a duffer! a miserable coward, sir!" and he made the little sugar-tongs in the glass basin dance again as he smote the table with his fist.

"Scoose me, sir, who might you be a-speakin' of?"

It was Mrs. Pendlebury, tall, gaunt, and worn-looking, with deep lines on her sallow face and her head cocked at an inquisitive and bellicose angle. She was a class leader and a great person at the mothers' meeting, and took quite a motherly interest in her young men, of whom Snape was the fifth.

She had come upstairs to clear away the breakfast things and had overheard the minister's last words. Caesar started when

thus addressed, and blushed; he always blushed, as if it were not enough to be a coward without also appearing one.

"Oh, it's nothing, Mrs. Pendlebury. I was only talking to myself as usual; I'm all right now."

The landlady gave her head a dignified toss, and then asked, tartly: "You was a-speakin' of my minister, I believe?"

"Well, well! it's all right, Mrs. Pendlebury."

But the landlady stood her ground and raised her head a little. "I don't allow nobody to say nothin' agin my minister, sir—it's them Hexams, I suppose?"

"No, no! the Exams were last week; it's nothing, I tell you, I'm all right," and Snape gave a significant glance at the pots on the table as a hint that he wanted them cleared away. But his visitor was not to be shaken off; she had her duty to perform; the circuit had committed these young men, one after another, to her to take care of, and she was going to fulfil her commission.

"Then it'll be that Piggin?"

"No, no, Mrs. Pendlebury, nothing of the

kind ; a—a—it's this Million Scheme, if you must know."

A smile as of conscious victory played for a moment round the deep-lined mouth of the landlady. "Oh, that !" she exclaimed, taking a step nearer the table. "Yes, we was a-considerin' of it last night."

Snape lifted his head with a glance of curiosity and surprise. "Considering it ? Where ? Who ?"

"Me and my members."

The minister could have laughed. The idea ! The members of this class, some thirty or so, were the very poorest in the Muggridge society, and both they and their leader would have to be paid for, if they had any place in the scheme. He smiled indulgently, leaned back in his chair, and clasping his hands over his knees, asked : "Well, and how did you get on ?"

"Well, you see, sir"—and, to Snape's dismay, she sank into a seat and prepared herself for the long talk which it was evident she had come to have—"Well, you see, sir, it was a bit awkered at first."

Snape thought that very likely indeed, but,

as there was now no escape from the good woman's eloquence, he tried to interest himself in it, or at least to appear to do so.

"It was that there roll as bothered us most, sir; they all wanted to be on, an' hev all their relations on as well. Old Sally Pride hez hed three husbands, and she wanted all them to be on; an' Deb West, her with the red hair and glidey eyes, wants her sweetheart on, an' him a ratcatcher. An' Letty Blears wants that child of hers on as nobody knows the father of. Oh, an' there's five members as is gone to heaven, an' two in the 'House,' an' three as is so old they never comes, an' all them as hez bad husbands wants 'em on, an'—an' what shall we do, sir?"

Snape was conscious of a curious struggle within between amusement and outraged seemliness, but presently he said: "Well, there's a very easy way of disposing of all those questions, Mrs. Pendlebury."

"'Ndeed, sir; what might it be?"

"Ask them to find the guineas; that will stop them. The Society will pay for all the *bona fide* members of your class, but we can-

not undertake for all their relations, you know."

"Well, sir?"

"Well? that will stop them, won't it?"

Mrs. Pendlebury rose to her feet and began to heap together the pots on the tray, then drawing herself to her full height, and facing the minister with a severe look, she said: "Mr. Snape, my members *is* members, an' not bonyfidees; the Society can pay for the bonyfidees, whatever they are, if it likes, but we shall pay for ourselves; we don't honour the Lord with *other people's* substance in my class, sir." And whisking the tray and its contents off the table with a resolute and defiant jerk, the irate lady carried them downstairs.

Left alone, the minister felt more ashamed of himself than ever. His landlady's brave words had enabled him to measure the depths of his own miserable cowardice. Any other man would have resigned right away, but he had not even the nerve to do that. In fact, it was a dismal aggravation of his condition that the more unfit he felt himself to be for his great calling, the more he clung to it and gloried in it.

This was by no means the first time that Mrs. Pendlebury's words had stimulated him, but now, smarting under the veiled and, perhaps, unconscious rebuke, he roused himself to his task. If such poor people as his landlady were bestirring themselves, it was high time that he should do something. He dressed himself and called upon the super. From him he went to see the senior society steward, Brother Timms. Thence he passed on to the house of the circuit steward, and then to the residence of the only great magnate in the circuit, Mr. Burton, of the Grange. When he had finished his round he had arranged for a preliminary consultative meeting to be held after the service on the following Wednesday evening.

As he walked home it occurred to him to call upon Piggin, the leader of the opposition in the circuit, and the terror of all ministers and officials. But he had not been encouraged even by those he had already consulted, and who were supposed to be loyal, and somehow he hadn't the heart to face the redoubtable Piggin just then ; and so all the rest of the day

he was tormenting himself for giving way to his weakness and allowing himself to be intimidated by such a man.

After tea he walked out to Swaddleby to preach, and entertained the trees and hedges *en route* with an astonishingly eloquent deliverance on the Million Scheme. After service he attempted to interest Farmer Whittle in the subject, but though he stuck valiantly to his text during supper and returned to it again and again in spite of the farmer's tendency to divert the conversation to the price of stock and the many excellencies of a particular breed of pigs, of which he was the sole local patron, he went away feeling that he had failed once more, and was plainly out of his sphere.

For the next few days the Rev. Caesar was the prey of all kinds of haunting fears. Nobody but his eccentric landlady seemed to have the least interest in the great scheme. Timms only laughed at him, and went off into a long string of stories, which the minister had heard again and again, but which were told so vivaciously and with such artistic variations,

that he was compelled to admit that he enjoyed them, chestnuts of the most ancient kind though they were. One or two of the local preachers spoke to him about the effort, but they were for the most part even more impecunious than he was himself, and could give nothing but advice.

But the minister's most anxious thoughts were expended upon the Burtons. Mr. Burton was rich, and was expected to become a county magistrate any day now. Everybody would look to the Grange to start the movement, and unless the people residing in that new and very grand-looking house could be got to take a hearty interest in the matter the thing was hopeless. And yet what could he do?

Since his election as chairman of the District Council Mr. Burton had talked of nothing but sewage and settling beds and effluents and precipitates and patent mixers, and Snape felt that if he went there again and did not succeed he would be more depressed than ever.

And then there was Miss Olive. She was a Newnham girl, with a broad, masculine fore-

head, and great, frank, grey eyes that looked you through. He was afraid of that girl, and was always haunted during his visits to the Grange with the feeling that she was secretly quizzing him and reckoning him up. She unnerved him when he was preaching, especially when he caught one of those satirical smiles of hers.

She was a painfully natural young lady of most uncompromising plainness of speech, but so refined and intellectual that if he had not been a minister, and had been anything like her equal, he might have been in danger of falling in love with her. But on this point he was very decided; he examined himself every day of his life, and always came to the conclusion that it was not to be thought of. She was a most engaging creature, and her culture gave a piquancy to her that was most fascinating, but whenever he left the Grange after a bright hour in her company he thought of Beauty and the Beast, and asked himself what she would think of him if she ever knew that he was only a factory operative's son.

He hated pretence and false show, but both she and her father always insisted upon treating

him as a cultivated person and a gentleman, and he had never had the courage to disabuse their minds on the subject, which was, of course, another evidence of his cowardice.

And so the days wore on, and the eventful Wednesday came. There was a good congregation at the service, and when it was over a goodly number stayed behind to the after meeting. The superintendent, though still ill, came in with his mouth muffled up, and took the chair. Most of the important people of the Society were present, and one or two representatives from the country dropped in. Altogether the prospect looked promising.

The super explained that the meeting was unofficial, and was called for the purpose of forming some sort of idea as to how much the circuit would contribute to the great fund. He invited free expression of opinion, and finished with a pathetic little reminder of the obligations they were all under to the church of their choice. When he sat down there was a long and awkward pause, and the Rev. Caesar, sitting next to his colleague, felt his spirit running rapidly down.

The super hinted that perhaps Mr. Burton would say a few words, but that great man had a grievance against the fund in the fact that he had been omitted from the District Committee, and therefore he excused himself.

The minister named Brother Timms rather hesitantly. The society steward had a reputation for making funny speeches, and certainly maintained it that night; but, after all, he contributed nothing to the subject in hand, and the junior minister had his own regretful and despondent feelings deepened by observing that Miss Olive, sitting near her father, looked scornful and a little impatient and weary.

Then the circuit steward was called upon, and he ventured, with considerable hesitation, to say that he thought the circuit might manage to raise, say, £200. The Rev. Caesar gasped; that was only about 10s. per member! What would the Connexion think of them?

Again the super appealed to the chairman of the District Council, but he only shook his head, and as Caesar sank back with a heavy sigh in his seat he heard an ominous scraping of the throat and a shuffling of feet, and

glancing up, observed the obstreperous Piggin on his feet. Piggin was short and square, with a frame full of awkward and unexpected angles ; he had Dundreary whiskers, a long, sharp nose, and a prominent, aggressive chin.

"Mr. Chairman," he began, drawing a long sniff and turning the whites of his eyes towards the ceiling, "some folks seem to think that this circuit is rich. I suppose if that's so, that long-standing Quarter board deficit has gone. I'm glad to hear it, sir. An' I always understood az we were only waitin' for the Swaddleby new chapel because we couldn't raise the money. That must be wrong, too. And we don't need money, it appears, for the Pemberton Mission or the Long Lane Sunday School. I'm delighted, Mr. Super. It appears that we have money to spend on building cedar houses in London. Very good, sir, but I claim to know something about Muggridge Methodism, and it appears to me, sir, that charity begins at home."

During this weak but biting speech the junior minister had been going hot and cold and cold and hot again. He felt, for the

moment at any rate, that he hated Piggin, and would like to tell him so, but just when that worthy finished, a sudden fit of his old cowardice came upon him, and he sighed heavily. But another voice broke on his ears, and a familiar one, too. Mrs. Pendlebury had risen to her feet, and was standing with her eyes closed as if in class.

"'Scoose me, Mister Super, might a widder woman arsk a question?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Pendlebury, go on."

"I should like to arsk where our Calebs and Joshuas are to-night," and as Caesar looked up in perplexity he caught sight of his landlady opening her eyes half-way to look at him.

The super looked puzzled, and turned inquiringly to his colleague. Caesar shook his head to express his inability to interpret, and then glanced furtively towards the Grange people, both of whom looked bored.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand you, Mrs. Pendlebury," said the super, looking hard at the woman, who was white with excitement.

She paused a moment, long enough, in fact, to attract every eye in the place to her, and then

she went on, speaking slowly through white lips: "We've heard about the sons of Anak and the walled cities, will somebody tell us about the grapes of Eshcol?"

Caesar, being more accustomed than the rest to Mrs. Pendlebury's curious methods of argument, was the first to catch the point of this rather obscure reference, and a great flush of emotion passed over him. The meeting and the great people from the Grange vanished out of sight, he saw nothing but his landlady's pale face, and behind her the whole stretch of his own short but happy and highly favoured life. In a moment he was on his feet.

Miss Olive opened her eyes with quickened interest, Mr. Burton brushed back the scanty locks of hair he had been so restlessly rubbing, and leaned forward to listen, and a flush of triumph passed over Mrs. Pendlebury's face.

"Friends," cried Caesar. "*I'll* tell you of the grapes of Eshcol. I was born in a cottage and worked in a mill, but Methodism has made me a minister of the glorious gospel. I owe my godly mother to *Methodism*: the conversion of my father after twenty years of wifely prayers

to *Methodism*: my education, my knowledge of God, and my conversion, to *Methodism*: my call to preach, and my training at dear old Didsbury, to *Methodism*. All I have that is worth anything I owe to Methodism, and to-day as she rises before the world to do this great deed I want to be with her, and to be worthy of her, and, God helping me, I will!"

For several minutes more he spoke, rapidly, almost incoherently, with moist eyes and quivering lips, and when at last he dropped back into his seat the super had hid his face in his handkerchief, and Mrs. Pendlebury was rocking herself and gazing up at the ceiling with shining, tearful eyes.

There was an awkward silence, and then some whispering; and presently Mr. Burton rose and, in very low tones, suggested that the meeting should be adjourned for a few days. When the super had pronounced the benediction he turned to his still excited colleague and gripped him with a grip that was an embrace in intensity, and then dragged him off home with him to supper.

Caesar spent the next day a prey to his old

torments, and even Mrs. Pendlebury, who was radiantly sure now that Muggridge would do its duty, could not comfort him. He had made an exhibition of himself; Miss Olive knew now that he was lowly born, and he pictured to himself again and again her quiet, cold contempt for a man who had so little fineness of feeling as to make a show of his emotions in public.

In the afternoon, to his terror, he received an invitation to high tea at the Grange, and would have given anything to have a decent excuse for declining. He had cried like a baby, he told himself, and had not even the consolation of having accomplished anything. The Burtons were unusually kind to him that night, but he was sure they were graver and more reserved than common, and Mr. Burton did not even mention the previous night's meeting.

"And so you are an ex-factory operative, and your mother was a weaver?" said Miss Olive, as she helped him on with his overcoat in the lobby as he was leaving.

And, with a desperate effort, Caesar answered: "Yes, Miss Burton, and I am not ashamed of it."

The lady stood on the doormat, evidently reflecting, and then she lifted her clear eyes to his and asked :

“And why did you not tell us all this before ? ”

“Because I’m a coward, Miss Burton ; a mean, unworthy coward.”

She looked long and steadily into his face as he spoke, and then, as he put out his hand to say good-night, she took it absently, and answered, in soft, low tones : “I wish there were many more such cowards in the world, Mr. Snape.”

Next day it was known in Muggridge that the Burtons were giving £500 to the Million Scheme, and a week later the Rev. Caesar was received at the Grange in another and closer capacity than that of minister.



THE COMMITTEE MAN

II

THE COMMITTEE MAN

THE last building you pass as you go out of the top end of Great Barkin is Jonathan Tradger's workshop. It occupies, in fact, the extreme point of the diamond-shaped island formed by two great roads that run through the town and unite at the end of it. The shop is therefore triangular in shape, having a long side upon each of the roads and a blunt point at the fork.

The outside walls are farmed by two rival firms of billstickers from the county town, and there is a great door facing the Penkerton Road that is never opened nowadays, and another great door opening on the High Street, that is never shut, at least in the daytime.

The first glance through the open door

suggests a carpenter's shop, for the floor is strewn with shavings and there is a joiner's bench against the opposite wall ; but a second look shows that the shavings are old and dirty, and that the bench is littered with paint cans and rolls of wall paper, whilst between the bench and the wall are stuck a gig umbrella and two ordinary ones, half hiding a plumber's soldering iron and a pair of tinker's shears which hang in a rough rack against the wall itself.

If you put your head inside you also observe, deep in the shop, a blacksmith's bellows, two or three disabled perambulators, an old-fashioned ordinary bicycle and three or four safeties.

The fact is, Jonathan, the proprietor of this shop, is the village Jack-of-all-trades ; for Barkin, now a decayed village, was once a market town, and as its tradesmen were driven out of it one by one by lack of business, the remaining inhabitants fell back upon Tradger, who, as he was too disreputable and intemperate to care much, gradually slipped into the way of doing any sort of odd job that might be brought him.

Some sixteen months ago, however, Jonathan was converted, as the result of the visit of a

Joyful News Mission car to the village, and since then he has been a consistent though demonstrative and unmanageably unconventional member of the Wesleyan Church.

The Methodists of Barkin are staid and highly decorous, and some of Jonathan's ways shocked and alarmed them; but he was so humble, so grateful to them for their kindly recognition of him, so eager in his desire to comprehend all the peculiarities of Methodist doctrine and procedure, and so devoted to the welfare of the Church of his choice, that nobody had the heart to check him, and Mrs. Wilkins, the supernumerary's widow, who was the ultimate authority on all matters of Church etiquette, was not without fear that the good folk would spoil him.

Jonathan was a sandy man, approaching sixty, a little below the medium height, with fairly regular features disfigured somewhat by a knobby red nose, due partly to pugilistic encounters and partly to the influence of drink.

"Wot's this?" he growled, in a voice that was now always husky, as he entered the shop one morning just before Christmas. As he

spoke he pointed with the only whole finger he possessed on his right hand to a circular lying on the box of a sewing machine which he had been repairing the day before.

"It's a circular. You're a committee man now," replied Walter John, his only son and assistant, who, in virtue of a brilliant victory obtained over the crafty machinations of a Government inspector in the matter of a sixth standard examination, was regarded by his parents as a perfect marvel of learning, and had consequently the right of opening and answering his father's correspondence.

"Read it," jerked out Jonathan shortly ; and, turning to look through the open door, as he generally did when he wanted to think, he leaned heavily on one leg in a listening attitude.

Walter John left the dog-kennel he was painting and, putting down his brush, picked up the missive and read in a brisk business style of which he was very proud :

"DEAR BRO.—I have pleasure in informing you that at the Quarterly Meeting held yesterday you were appointed a member of 'The

Twentieth Century Fund' committee for this circuit.—Yours sincerely, GEO. WILDE, *Secretary.*"

Jonathan drew himself up ; a look of grave importance came upon his face, a soft gratified light beamed from his eyes, whilst he pursed out his lips and screwed his mouth about, to conceal a tell-tale smile. Then he turned and had another long stare out of the door, and presently, giving his mouth a sort of covering wipe with the back of his hand, he picked up the circular which his son had laid down and examined it, back and front, over and over again. In a wavering, meditative manner he scrutinised the document, and then, as if fearing to be caught in the act, he abruptly dropped it and resumed his staring through the door.

Walter John was perfectly aware that his father wanted to ask a question, but as it was always part of his policy to maintain his intellectual reputation by affecting a lofty indifference, he commenced to hiss a tune through his teeth, and became deeply absorbed in the painting of the kennel. Jonathan watched the

operation out of the corner of his eye for a time, and then turning to the machine, he resumed his work of the night before, asking as he picked up his tools: "Wot's committys for?"

And Walter John stood back and examined the kennel critically as he answered: "For talkin'."

Jonathan looked enquiringly at his son for a moment, and then bending over his work he applied an oilcan to the machine and gave the treadle an experimental touch with his foot as he asked: "But wot do they *do*?"

And the youthful but unconsciously cynical libeller of these great modern institutions answered with a slight accent of contempt: "Oh, nothing, only talk."

Jonathan heaved a perplexed and protesting sigh, and was just about to address a remonstrance to his son, when a shadow fell across the sewing machine, and a deep voice behind him cried: "Mornin', boy, mornin'."

The new-comer was a tall, thin man, with broad, angular shoulders drawn up into his almost invisible neck, for the morning was cold and nipping. His hands were thrust deep into

his pockets, and his thin snipe nose and red eyes were moist with tears of cold. He was Jonathan's class leader and chief mentor, and his name was Solomon Jurby.

Saluting Jonathan and his son as he passed them, Solomon strode to the far end of the shop, where there was a small stove and a disabled wooden cradle which, turned on its side, served as a seat. Squatting down upon this, he took the lid off the stove and began to stir the fire, grumbling the while at the weather. But Jonathan had something much more important than mere meteorological discussion on his mind, and so without further hesitation he commenced: "Sol, wot's this Cen-cen-tenary Fund?"

Solomon looked blank for a moment. "W-o-t? Oh, t' Centennery Fund thou means."

"Tchat!" interrupted Walter John, with superior impatience. "He means that there Twentieth Century Fun'."

"O-h, that! Ah! that's somethin', that is! I know'd we should hev somethin' wonderful when that Hughes was President."

Jonathan felt himself growing bigger, but

curbing his rising elation he asked : " Well, wot is it ? "

" Wot is it ? it's a reg'ler flabbergaster, that's wot it is ! Huz Methodisses is goin' to subscribe *one million guineas*."

Jonathan's face expanded into a broad gratified grin, and he looked at his mentor with wondering delight. In a moment he ventured : " How much is a milliond, Solomon ? "

" A million ! a million's t-e-n h-u-n-d-r-e-d t-h-o-u-s-a-n-d," and Solomon sounded like a man who was struggling with the miserable inadequacy of human language to express the vastness of his ideas.

Jonathan's face was a picture, and, as wonder is one of the strongest stimulants to eloquence, Solomon plunged off into a detailed description of the great scheme, adding in his excitement details which were, to say the least, apocryphal. So stimulating, in fact, did he find Jonathan's wonderment that, having exhausted his own resources on the question, he sent Walter John to his house for the last issue of the *Recorder*, and when he returned Jonathan left his work and joined Solomon at the stove, listening

with ejaculations of astonishment and delight as his learned son reeled off at express rate a long account of the great meeting at Leeds.

As the reading proceeded, he punctuated it with energetic nods; then he smote his hands together in keenest relish, and when at last with a rhetorical flourish the self-satisfied reader finished the President's speech, Jonathan leaned forward, and smiting Solomon heavily on the back, he cried with emphatic conviction :

"Sol, t' Bank of Englan's *nowt* to huz Methodisses."

Solomon smiled indulgently upon what he regarded as the pardonable extravagance of his friend, and was just about to make a reply when Walter John, now warm to his work, plunged off into a long account of the historic roll, and from that to a list of circuit subscriptions, in which, as Jonathan remarked, thousands seemed "as common as coppers."

When at last the great reader finished, out of breath and a little hoarse, his father was in the seventh heaven of delight and pride. As Solomon rose to go, however, Jonathan had a

sudden recollection, and checking his friend as he strolled towards the door, he asked abruptly : " Wot's committy men got to do ? "

" Do ? Oh, lead off t' subscriptions an' collect. Wot for ? "

Jonathan pointed to the circular still lying on the sewing machine, and Solomon took it up, gave a little nod of surprise, and then assuming a very knowing look, as if to convey the impression that he had fully expected some such thing, he lounged to the door. He had reached the open air and was standing gazing down the road when Jonathan followed him, and drawing him by the button-hole still farther away, in order to be out of earshot of Walter John, he said : " Fancy, Sol ! drunken Johnty's name among all them million Methodys ! "

All that morning as Jonathan went about his various occupations, his mind dwelt delightedly on the wonderful scheme in which so lowly a man as he was to have his part ; as he meditated, the dark shadows of difficulties cast themselves every now and again across the brightness of his visions,

but he put them away, as had been his habit far too much through all his life, and resolutely kept before himself the great glory that was coming to the Church to which he owed so much.

But when he had sent Walter John out with the now restored sewing machine, he stole to the seat which Solomon had so recently occupied in order to face fairly the hindrances which he could no longer hide from himself. To begin with, his wife was not a member, and had always had decided leanings towards the Church of England.

Moreover, to the great comfort of the family, she had always been the purse-bearer of the household, and they were very poor, having scarcely got out of the financial difficulties into which his intemperate habits had plunged them. He felt certain that Rebecca would not see the wisdom or even the possibility of giving away money, whole guineas at a time, and would be able to tell him of any number of claims upon their slender resources which, in her judgment, were both more pressing and more equitable than what he desired.

He fancied he could hear her repeating again one of her favourite proverbs, "Just before generous, Jonathan," and the very most that he could expect her to do was to offer to give a guinea for himself. But a committee man whose family even were not included in the contributions would be an everlasting disgrace to the great movement.

And then there was that roll-signing. He had almost forgotten how to write, and his wife, even if she consented to subscribe, could not use a pen any better than he could himself, and their clumsy caligraphy would be a sad disfigurement to the great record. For somehow Jonathan had got it fixed in his mind that all who went upon the roll would have to sign their own names.

And then there was Martha Jane, who was in service some thirty miles away; she was almost as decided in her preference for the Church as her mother, and would not be able to come so far to sign, even if they were able to raise the money.

Once more, there was Walter John to be considered; he was a Wesleyan certainly, for

he blew the little chapel organ and attended the Sunday school.

Altogether, as Jonathan looked at the difficulties fairly and squarely, they appeared blacker and blacker, and when he was called to dinner, he left the shop in a very perplexed and anxious frame of mind. It occurred to him as he walked to the house to broach the question to his wife, as he generally had to do in his troubles, but the domestic weather seemed so threatening when he got indoors that he judged it better to defer the matter until a more propitious moment.

It came that very night, and Jonathan, finding his wife in a cheerful mood for her, told his tale ; skipping characteristically the monetary difficulty and presenting to his wife's superior inventiveness the problem of the roll-signing. Rebecca heard him through, and ignoring altogether the writing question, she gently, but with remorseless logic, made it clear to him that the thing was entirely beyond them. Her catalogue of pressing needs and approaching payments made his heart sink, and he found himself, to his alarm, getting angry.

"But, woman!" he cried, when she had finished, "we're on the committee!" But Rebecca only shook her head, and as Jonathan was naturally passionate, and since his conversion had been haunted more with the fear of losing his temper than even slipping back into intemperance, he made a strong effort, choked back his resentment, and with a sigh of reluctant resignation went off to bed.

When he had gone, Rebecca, who had feared an outburst from her husband, and had watched with growing gratitude his successful effort in self-control, sat glowering moodily into the fire. Once or twice she sighed and her lips moved as if in prayer, and presently she got up and took a small rosewood box from the mantelpiece. Opening this, she picked out a *Joyful News* pledge card and a Methodist class ticket, upon the former of which was scrawled in rude, uneven characters her husband's name. With pensive, musing face she turned them over, and then looking at them earnestly through moistening eyes, she murmured: "It mus' be done!—some-way! Them two papers is worth a million, aye, a million apiece to me;" and putting them slowly

and carefully back in the box, she made her way upstairs.

During the next few days Jonathan was greatly exercised in his mind as to how he should raise the money for his subscription, for though on the night of his conversation with his wife he had almost given up the idea, the new day brought new hope ; but as nobody had told him that the money could be paid in small instalments, he was at his wits' end to solve the problem.

He overhauled the miscellaneous articles which had accumulated in his workshop in the hope of finding something saleable, but as he had often done this before to raise money for drink, there was nothing left that would give him any help.

Then he debated with himself the possibility of selling the Christmas pig, or rather its carcass, for the animal had already been slaughtered ; but as his wife generally managed that business herself, he soon abandoned hope in that direction.

Then it occurred to him to try to borrow something from his absent daughter ; but, again, the remembrance of like transactions in his unregenerate days restrained him.

Finally, in his increasing perplexities, he fell back upon his old friend Solomon, and as they sat together one dinner hour over the little stove, he unbosomed himself. Solomon was very mysterious and taciturn for a while, but seeing his pupil's anxiety and knowing something of the official secrets of the Barking Wesleyans, he at last took his pipe out of his mouth and said: "Johnty boy, be content, whoever is left off that paper thy name will be there," and then he lapsed again into the most discouraging silence.

"But wot about the fam'ly?" asked Jonathan anxiously, and Solomon shook his head as if to say that they were in a very different category. And of course this conversation did not comfort Jonathan as much as it was intended to do, for he somehow felt that the thing would lose much of its interest to him if his beloved ones did not take part in it.

One day in Christmas week, however, Jonathan received a surprise that almost reconciled him to being left out of the great achievement. As he was dressing to go to class and was struggling before the little glass trying to arrange his frayed necktie so that the place where the

lining showed would be concealed, his wife came downstairs dressed to go out.

Jonathan looked at her in astonishment, for she seldom went out at night. "I'm thinkin' of goin' with thee to-night, Johnty," she said softly, as she looked hard at the floor. And Jonathan eyed her over from head to foot as he asked :

"To class?"

"To class."

And then it flashed into his mind that his wife was going to class to console him for his disappointment about the great fund, and he turned hastily away and tried to swallow something. Well! it was a grand idea after all! She had chosen that one thing which she knew would be sweetest of all to him. Oh, what a wife she was! and for the next few minutes as they walked down the High Street towards the chapel he silently thanked God that they had ever heard of this glorious fund.

It happened to be fellowship meeting that night at the class, and so Jonathan missed the luxury of hearing his wife's first "experience." But when the meeting was over and the leader

was marking the names, he said : "Glad to see Sister Tradger to-night ; we won't press you to have your name down now ; perhaps you would like to try some other class first."

"But I want it down."

"To-night ?"

"To-night !"

Jonathan could have hugged his wife then and there, and as he went home he told himself that he should always love the Million Fund, and if ever he had the chance of giving to his beloved Church——

But next morning it took all his new joy to sustain him, for the post brought him a summons to the committee meeting, and with no chance of being able to contribute he felt that he could not go, and his absence might be taken for indifference ; and he owed so much to Methodism that he could not bear the thought of that.

In the afternoon Solomon called at the shop, and was so full of the approaching meeting that the carpenter had not the heart to tell him that he did not intend to attend ; and when he went away Jonathan was more miserable

than ever. As night came on he grew very restless and dejected ; once he told himself to have faith in God and go to the committee : but that effort was too great to be sustained, and as the time drew near he seated himself moodily by the fire at home in fidgety distress lest Solomon should call for him, as he sometimes did.

Just then there was a sharp knock at the door, and he felt a chill creep over him as he heard a man's voice. But it was not Solomon, it was the circuit minister.

"Come, Brother Tradger, aren't you coming to the meeting?"

Jonathan groaned and answered sadly : "I can't, sir ; I've nothing to give."

Jonathan heard a stifled sob behind him, which he knew came from his wife ; but the minister was speaking again.

"Never mind, come along ! We must have *you* on the roll whoever is omitted."

"But that would be four guineas, an' we haven't one."

"Four fiddlesticks ! Nothing of the kind ; this isn't a tax, my friend, it's a free-will

offering, and those who have will give for those who haven't."

"But I'm on the committee, sir."

"Of course you are ; I proposed you myself ; only *some* can give, but we must *all* share in the joy of it, you know. You must just give what you are able without injury to yourselves, and that you can do by instalments."

"By what, sir?" (This from Mrs. Tradger.)

"By instalments—so much a week or month, you know."

Rebecca turned her back to the minister and marched hurriedly upstairs.

In a moment she came down with a strange glow upon her faded face.

"Can them go on the roll az is only just joined, sir?"

"Yes, of course ! But you can't afford, Mrs. Tradger, you can't really."

"An' can children az isn't members be on sir?"

"Yes, if they are the children of our people certainly."

And then Rebecca, whom Jonathan was watching intently, put out her thin worn arm

and laid a guinea on the table. "That's for the Church az turned a bad husban' into a good 'un, an' that," putting a crown piece near the guinea, "is á thankful offering from the poor wife az got that new husban'," and then, fumbling in her pocket, she brought out a shilling, and placing it near the other money, she went on, "an' that's sixpence a week for Walter John an' for the dear lass as sent her father's guinea."

The minister was overcome and tried to expostulate, but Mrs. Tradger insisted on having her way; the instalment plan settled everything, she said.

And so Jonathan went to the committee.

A MANCHESTER MAN

III

A MANCHESTER MAN

YES, he was incomprehensible ; the dearest, the best of fellows, the most generous and indulgent of husbands, and as true a man as ever stepped, but peculiar, self-contradictory, and perplexing, and pretty Mrs. Harwood, with a pucker on her white brow and an absorbed, far-away look in her eyes, gave a soft protesting sigh and sank still farther back into the easy chair which already almost buried her. She was thinking, of course, of her husband, to whom she had been married now about four years.

She was a Wesleyan minister's daughter, and had been brought up in the bookish, unworldly atmosphere of the manse, where she had been her father's companion and favourite. Conse-

quently her tastes were distinctly literary, and she was better up at any rate in the lighter literature of the day than most ladies of her age and rank.

Everybody said she was a remarkable judge of human nature, and all her friends complimented her on her gift of reading character. She believed them, of course, in a becoming way, but lo! the very first man she had ever become intimately acquainted with, and the man of all others she most wanted to read nonplussed her altogether, and after four years of careful study of him she had to confess that he was an enigma.

Her father had travelled mostly in country circuits where the good folk take life easily, and she had grown up to dislike and fear the commercial spirit, and after all she had married that embodiment of intensest commercialism, a Manchester man. He was a prompt, cool, and smart business man, with a reputation of being the keenest buyer on the market; but before she had time to settle upon this as the keystone of his character, she found that at home he was easy-going, jovial, and almost

carelessly extravagant in matters of household expenditure.

One thing had become clear to her in the course of this interesting study, namely, that her husband had a most intolerant hatred of everything that savoured of pretence, and of this she was proud; only he carried it to such strange and uncomfortable lengths, and was very fond of a curious sort of self-depreciation, and liked to speak of everything that belonged to himself in disparaging and apologetic terms—a peculiarity which she had also noticed was common to Lancashire men.

In the company of ministers and officials he assumed the manner of an ignorant and indifferent onlooker, and then amongst unimportant people he would talk like a Methodist puritan. He seemed, in fact, to think that it was his duty to deceive his fellow-men as much as possible about all his most important feelings and interests.

He wasn't a wholesale draper, he was in the "rag" trade. His large warehouses he always spoke of as "th' shop," and if ever they went into particular company where she was

anxious that he should appear a gentleman, he was sure to drop into the dialect—a thing he never did, or scarcely ever, at home.

All their business friends regarded him as one of the safest men financially of their set, but he delighted, in all sorts of company, in telling romancing stories which seemed to indicate that he was in a state of chronic financial tightness, whilst he pretended to be very anxious to keep friendly with the chapel steward, because he was the bank-manager, and might be awkward about the overdraft.

He affected to know and care nothing about the "Connexion," and yet he took in all the Conference publications, and went to sleep over them every Sunday afternoon, and he had a little joke about not being able to get off unless he had the current number.

Altogether he was a contradiction and an enigma, and it was very humiliating to her pride and her reputation for character-reading, to be obliged to confess to herself that she was very little nearer understanding the man she loved than she was on the day she married him.

And just now there was special reason that she should know how to deal with him ; for this great " Million Scheme " had been announced, and it was just the thing to appeal to her imaginative temperament, and it had done. She was a Methodist of the Methodists, and as a child of the manse felt great pride in the Church of her fathers.

But she knew something of the Manchester men by this time, and felt certain that to their cool, level-headed commercial minds the enterprise would look fantastic and quixotic. What a pity and a shame it would be, if sordid love of money and lack of imagination should spoil so grand a thing.

By this time she knew without the least vanity that she was an important person in the circuit, and had more influence than the wives of most of the officials ; and if only her husband would support her, she felt that she could make this rich suburban circuit of theirs do its duty. But there was the difficulty ; her husband never seemed to take her seriously, and though he never crossed her in any of her little projects, and seemed, indeed, anxious in a lazy sort of

way that she should have her desire, she felt certain that his view would be the one prevalent amongst men of his class, and that he would simply give a respectable little sum to please her, and in her name, and that would be all.

And then there was one other thing that troubled her ; an episode had taken place recently which had greatly humbled her, and provided a reason why she felt she could not greatly urge her husband on this particular question. Soon after their marriage her father, now a supernumerary, had visited them, and had one day confided to her husband certain difficulties he had with the little investments he had made to provide for the evening of life. And her husband told her when the old man had gone to bed, that parsons should never have anything to do with money, and had then offered to undertake to re-arrange her father's affairs, and make such changes as would secure a better return upon the investments. She had eagerly agreed, and the thing had been done, and everything had been handed over to George, who had managed somehow to increase the permanent return.

This was now three years ago, but recently

she had been to London to a British Women's Convention or something of the sort, and had stayed with her brother. He had never been a favourite of hers, but one night he greatly angered her by insinuating that her husband was making a good thing out of the "Pater's" shares.

She was too indignant to say much in reply, but she went home next day, and somehow the nasty innuendo had stuck to her, and so after fighting with it and worrying for some time, she got a friend to find out what the shares were making. A day or two after he wrote to her to say that she must be mistaken in the name of the company she had referred to, for that concern had gone down over two years ago, and anybody holding the scrip must know that it was worthless paper.

And then it had all come to her; her husband had known what was coming, and had made the proposal upon which they had acted for the purpose of keeping trouble from her and her parent, and had paid the dividend for two years at least, although he had not received a penny.

This revelation made her ill for a day or two, and aroused all kinds of awkward curiosity on her husband's part; she felt so humbled about the matter that her manner was unconsciously changed, and her husband grew very suspicious indeed. She could never tell him, but the thought that he was doing this secretly for love of her, closed her lips effectually on the question of the great Million Scheme.

Still it would be an everlasting shame if the rich suburban circuit to which they belonged did not do its duty; she was just old enough to remember the Thanksgiving Fund, and the pride she had taken in giving the first half-guinea she ever had of her own to this fund, and she gathered from his letters that her father was quite as enthusiastic about this effort as he had been in the other.

She knew how he would be planning and scheming, and even perhaps selling his precious books that he might do his duty, and she, his daughter, married to a comparatively rich man and living in ease and luxury, would only give a little more than he did. The thought was

unbearable. Oh! if only she knew just how to move this stolid hus——

But just then a long pair of arms were thrown around her, and she was lifted up like a baby, whilst a strong, keen face was put down to hers and a loud, but cheery voice exclaimed, "Hello! Doxey-didlums! Which of those precious mothers has pawned her petticoat now?"

"Oh! George, how you did startle me! I didn't hear the tram stop. No! it isn't the mothers, it's nothing," and she kissed the brown moustache that was put down to her face, and slipped out of his grasp and upstairs to touch up her ruffled hair and assume as bright a look as she could.

As she served the tea she talked about the super's nerves, and then about little Freddy, snug in his bed upstairs, and told in her vivacious way all the young scamp's day's doings, until George forgot his temporary suspicions, and presently turned away from the table and drew up to the fire, with his favourite briar in his mouth and a comfortable contented look on his face.

"George, what do you *really* think about this

Million Scheme?" and she leaned back in the rocking chair, and tried to appear unconcerned.

"Pah! High falutin'! Cock-and-bull idea!" and George put his slippers on the brass rail of the fender, thrust his little finger into the bowl of his pipe, and appeared to be half asleep.

"George! how can you! I think it's noble, it's grand; I'm proud of the Church that could conceive such a scheme, whether it comes to anything or not," and in her excitement she rose to her feet and stood leaning her bare, white arm upon the mantelpiece, whilst she looked earnestly down upon her amused and indolent husband.

Now nothing pleased George better than to get his wife "on her high horse," as he called it, and so he sat looking at her with twinkling eyes and most obvious admiration, and presently he said, "My stars, Kitty! but you would have made a grand parson; I'll have you nominated for a School-board candidate, blow me if I don't."

"George, don't talk slang and nonsense! I think the scheme is a glorious one."

He made no reply for a while, and evidently

thought none necessary, but Kitty was impatient and anxious, and at last she said: "Do talk sensibly, there's a dear; what does Oxley say about it?"

Oxley was the circuit steward, and of course his opinion was important.

"Never heard him mention it," was the depressing answer.

"And what does Redfern think?" (Redfern was the ex-steward, and a rich bachelor.)

"Oh, he's sure to go in for it; he's as bad as you."

"Did he say how much the circuit ought to give?"

"Oh, five hundred pounds."

"Five hundred pounds! the miserable old sinner: why, he ought to give that himself."

Kitty was never so interesting in her husband's eyes as when she was excited, and now he was delighted to see her pretty indignation, and so to prolong the entertainment, he asked: "What do *you* think the circuit ought to give?"

"Give! well, the super thinks we ought to raise two thousand pounds, and that is the very least."

And George, with a burst of protesting, amazed laughter, leaned back in his chair, and cried: "Hay, what a world this would be, if it were ruled by women and parsons—what would *you* give, Kitty, if you had it?"

"Give?" and Kitty slid absently down upon the hassock before the fire, and began staring into the embers to assist her imagination. "Give? I'd give five hundred pounds, that's what I would give, and not a penny less."

"Five hundred fiddlesticks! Why, Kitty wench, you'd break a bank!"

It was a sure sign that George was more interested than he seemed when he dropped into dialect, and so his wife glanced sharply at him, and was just going to pin him with a very straight question, when he said: "What should you give five hundred pounds for?"

"What for? Oh, for a hundred reasons."

"Well, what, for instance?"

Kitty settled herself down upon the hassock, and after a moment's meditation she began: "Well, I've the noblest old father in the world, and at this very minute he's cudgelling his worn old brains to find out what he shall give and

where he shall get it—I'd give a hundred pounds for him."

"Humph!"

"And I was educated by Methodism, and in all our circuits we received from the dear good people kindness upon kindness, that makes me cry when I think of it—I'd give a hundred pounds for that."

"Bosh!"

"And there's a curly-headed little rascal upstairs, who came as a Christmas box two years ago—I'd give a hundred, yes, many a hundred for him."

George burst into an ironical laugh, but even Kitty could see that it was only to conceal some very different emotion. "Fire away, Kitty; you're doing grandly."

But Kitty couldn't go on just then; she looked very earnestly into the fire, and then fell slowly forward and dropped her fair face against her husband's knee, but she never spoke, and George was not sure that she could just then. "Go on, madcap; don't half do it now you've started."

If her husband could have seen her face he

would have hesitated to press her, but he could not ; so presently, after another prompting from him, she moved a little, and then, beginning to speak very fast, she stammered : “ I’d give all the rest and—and a thousand times more for the best and most—most tormenting husband that ever was.”

And George got hurriedly up and left the room.

Now, there was a sort of Freemasonry amongst the officials of the circuit, and they generally arrived at agreements as to what they should do or give on occasions like the present, either in one of their smoke-rooms or in the train as they went to town in the morning. Two or three of them came in that same night and stayed later than usual, and from what Kitty could gather from her reticent husband, the figure for the circuit seemed likely to be fixed at £1,500.

Next night at the committee meeting that sum, to the distress of the super, was agreed upon, and when he called upon his infallible comforter, Mrs. Harwood, he had a doleful tale to tell, and was altogether out of heart about the matter.

And Kitty, though she felt somehow more hopeful after her talk with her husband, could not say anything to relieve his mind, and so when he had gone and her heart was pitying him and thinking of her father's troubles of a similar kind in days gone by, a little idea struck her, and on the Sunday evening she asked two or three of her husband's closest friends in to supper, and as soon as she had set them going at the table she opened out upon them, and her husband listened with his mischievous eyes dancing with enjoyment as she tried to make them feel ashamed of themselves. But next day George told her that the men had greatly enjoyed her preaching and his cigars, and were prepared to come as often as she liked to invite them. Oh, the hardness of these Manchester men !

Her last hope was in the great meeting ; if only she could get them there, and her husband too, in the enthusiasm of that grand gathering surely they would be moved to do something worthy of them. But George, when she suggested that of course he was going, pooh-poohed the idea ; though, as he generally did this and

went after all, she still hoped against hope. The worst of her, George said, was that she generally "went the whole hog" with a thing when she once got started, and let things get on her crazy little brain; but when he was going out in the morning of the day of the meeting he half promised to meet her at the door of the Central Hall.

All the forenoon she was out visiting her lady friends, and trying to get them to feel as she did and influence their husbands. And then as soon as lunch was over, as luck would have it, one of her intolerable but imperious headaches came on and in a few minutes she realised but too surely that there would be no meeting for her that night.

This, of course, made her worse, and as she lay on her couch half-dead with paralysing pain, she sent her servant to the telephone to tell George and urge him to go to the meeting. This brought him home earlier than usual, and he seemed quite angry with her for putting herself out, and declared in quite a snappy way that the "confounded Million Scheme was not worth it." By this, of course, she saw how

little he really cared for the thing, and she was so prostrate that she could not even bear the effort of trying to persuade him to go to the meeting.

It was a long, dreary evening, in spite of the fact that this matter-of-fact and worldly husband of hers proved a delightful nurse, and though later on the pain abated somewhat, she felt so languid and disappointed that she was beginning to think of going to rest, when the door-bell rang, and in came the super from the great gathering.

"Well, how have you got on?" she cried eagerly, lifting her head from her cushion, still covered though it was with whisky cloths.

"Oh, splendidly! magnificently! I shall not sleep to-night; but you are ill, Mrs. Harwood."

Kitty waved her hand impatiently to check his sympathies, and cried: "Tell us all about it."

Nothing loth, the minister launched forth into an animated description of the meeting, and finished by quoting the sums promised by the various circuits.

"And we promised £1,500," said Kitty, with a mournful, half-contemptuous sigh.

And that's more than we shall ever raise," began George, but the super interrupted.

"No! No! We! We came out grandly: but I forgot, you don't know, do you? The oddest thing;" and he began to fumble in his pockets and brought out a bit of paper.

"What? what was it?" and Kitty half rose from her couch in her eagerness.

"Well! the funniest thing! I feel rather shaky about it, but I was excited and promised."

"Go on! Do go on!"

"Just as I was going into the hall a fellow, a clerk or something, stopped me and asked my name. When I told him he gave me this note, and when I got upon the platform I opened it, and what do you think was in it?"

"Don't know. Oh, do go on!"

"The note is there; it is on plain paper and type-written, so that nobody can guess who sent it, and it just says:

"Please increase the amount promised by your circuit by £1,000. You will receive a cheque for the amount in a few days.—Yours sincerely,

" 'A MEMBER.' "

Kitty snatched the note hastily from the super's hand, and read and re-read it, but there was nothing more to be learnt. "Whoever can it be?" she gasped.

"I haven't the least idea," said the super. "I was dazed, and am yet, about it, for that matter; but I promised, whatever the result may be. Ah, whom do you think it will be, Mr. Harwood?"

George was sitting looking meditatively into the fire. "Some old washerwoman or other, with more brass than brains."

But somehow his manner was not quite as natural as he wished it to be, for his wife lifted her head and looked sharply at him across the room, and as he turned his eyes away she jumped up and rushed at him. "George," she cried, pushing him back, so that she could see his eyes, "look at me."

"Bless me, the woman's dotty!" cried George; but though he lifted his head, his eyes sought the ornaments on the mantelpiece.

"Now then! Look at me! Let me see your eyes," cried Kitty, and as at last he turned them to her, she said triumphantly: "It is! it is! Mr

Frost, it is George! Oh, you dear, kind, naughty, teasing man, it's *you*, and it is like you! I'd love you more than ever—if I could," and she kissed him again and again.

An hour later, as the super left, George saw him to the door, and in his gruffest manner insisted that the thing should never be known.

Next morning the contractor occupants of the 8.41 first smoking to town decided that the super had lost his head at the meeting on the previous night, and would find himself "in a hole" before long, and George quite agreed with them.

THE BLANK LINE



IV

THE BLANK LINE

EVERYBODY who knew anything about the case agreed with absolute and emphatic unanimity, that there never was such a body of trustees as that which built the Floxton Common new chapel.

The super said so, and the tightening of his thin lips and the projection of his strong, clean jaw as he made the declaration left nothing to be desired in the way of uncompromising statement.

The resident minister said so, and as he had taken part in trustees' meetings, committee meetings, sub-committees and the like almost every other night for the last eighteen months, surely his evidence is uncontrovertible.

The trustees said so themselves, and inasmuch

as several of them had almost lived on the premises during the all-absorbing erection, and had been threatened by their respective wives with separation applications, divorce proceedings, etc., to say nothing of such everyday suggestions as those of sending them their beds and meals to the premises, it must be admitted that they had a right to an opinion on the subject. But even people who only came into occasional contact with them got the same impression.

The architect declared solemnly, that he had never served so extraordinary a body of men during the whole course of his professional career, and he added when he got into safe company that he hoped he never should again.

The Manchester committee people shook their wise heads at the very mention of Floxton Common, and gave vent to sighs expressive of unspeakable feelings, and even the President of the Conference when he went to open the chapel said they were the most extraordinary body of men he had ever met.

The super said that nothing surprised him

so much about these "Brethren" as their automatic unanimity—except it was their chronic disagreement. Against the architect, the super, the "red-tapeism" of the Manchester Committee, they were a solid unit, but amongst themselves they did not agree, even about the most trivial things. At every one of their innumerable meetings some one either resigned or consented to withdraw a previous resignation, and nearly every man on the board had declared at one time or other that nothing should ever induce him to go near the place again.

Brother Bottoms had withdrawn on the sites question, and Brother Taubman on the selection of the architect, whilst Brother Eli Waites, who was disgusted with the "baby work" of the two gentlemen mentioned, sent in his resignation and even withdrew his subscription when it came to a spire.

The youngest trustee, a mere upstart of forty, caused two meetings and two adjournments about the position of the pulpit, which he insisted should be at the right corner of the chancel arch as appointed by the architect, and of course resigned when the older members

of the meeting on anti-ritualistic grounds insisted on its being placed in the middle ; and they in their turn threatened to leave if the entrance, which in the old chapel had always been called the porch, was christened the " Narthex."

The young minister of the circuit, who was a probationer fresh from college, was considerably exercised by the irreconcilable inconsistencies which he detected in these good men, for as he went about his work he was compelled to hear all about these points of difference, and when the last touches were being put upon the building and it was being got ready for the opening services, he was amazed to discover the men who had objected so strenuously to spire or pulpit or narthex taking their friends round and showing these particular things as the specialities of the new sanctuary, and even in one or two cases seeming to wish to convey the idea that they were the original suggesters of these features ; at any rate they seemed to be the things they were most proud of, and took the greatest delight in exhibiting.

But after all it was a noble thing these people

had done ; they were not a rich Church nor a very numerous one, yet they had by hard work and wonderful self-sacrifice built a beautiful edifice at a cost of nearly £7,000, which they intended to open free of debt, and the super, in spite of his many troubles with them, was full of admiration for the way they had acted, and was prompted to say, as he had often done before, that there were no people like the Methodists after all.

And just at the time when they thought they had got through all their trials, they were plunged into one that was worse than any they had come through. When the day came for selecting the places they would occupy in the new building, it turned out that there were two applicants for one pew—the back pew in the chapel.

Old Mr. Bottoms had sat in the back pew in the old chapel, and thought he ought to have the same place in the new one, and James Higson, who had a delicate wife who sometimes wanted to go out before the service was concluded, had set his heart upon it, and had stated twenty times over, he declared, that he should want that particular seat.

The trustees might have settled the matter in their boisterous way if left to themselves, but unfortunately Barbara, old Bottoms' daughter, a female of a certain age, and an old flame of Higson's, took up the cudgels for what she called their "rights," and attacked Higson, who was chapel steward, before strangers, as he was arranging with other pew-holders for their seats.

Eventually the matter came before the trustees, and after the usual long wrangle, was decided against Higson. As soon as the decision was announced, he rose to his feet, took up his hat, bowed with mock ceremoniousness to the chairman and then to the meeting, and walked out of the room.

One or two went after him and did not return. Those who remained behind took no further interest in the business, and when a few minutes later the super and his colleague called at Higson's he refused to see them, and next day sent all his books in, and signified that he had done with the Wesleyans once for all and for ever.

The super, though not given much to senti-

ment, was quite touched to see the distress of the trustees when they found that Higson's defection was serious and apparently final ; they refused even to discuss the question of filling his offices, and old Bottoms, in spite of terrible threats from his aggressive daughter, sent at least two notes to Holly Villa, where Higson lived, to ask him to take the pew he wanted. But all was in vain.

As the great day of the opening drew near all sorts of clumsy attempts were made to bring about a reconciliation, and Billy Clipston, the shoemaker, declared again and again that when the time came Higson would not be able to stay away, but would turn up "as sure as heggs is heggs."

But the day came and went, and the offended one did not appear, and the super heard in the vestry and in the aisles of the chapel a great deal more about the absent man's many past services than he heard about the event they were actually celebrating. They told of what he had endured for the sake of the good cause, and altogether the *éclat* of one of the greatest days in the history of Floxton Common

Methodism was spoilt by the constant lamentations of the chief men about the place because their old fellow-worker had not taken part. The opening services were continued for three Sundays, and it was confidently prophesied by Billy and others that Higson would never be able to hold out to the end.

But he did ; and when they sang the final doxology at the last of the opening services, because it was not only opened, but free from debt, two or three of them told their minister afterwards that they had not enjoyed their great victory at all, and would rather have a thousand pounds debt with Higson than all the triumph of the day without him.

Well, at any rate it was a notable achievement, and the super was more than pleased with the noble way in which the people had carried out and finished their great undertaking.

And then something else began to trouble him. He had said as little as possible about the great Million Scheme whilst the good folk of Floxton Common were straining every nerve and almost punishing themselves to clear their chapel, and now it seemed exceedingly

hard upon them to ask them to look at another effort. But circumstances left him no option; he had already made a definite promise of £2,000 for the circuit; they had held the meeting at the circuit chapel, and the contributions had somewhat disappointed him, so that there was now nothing for it but to have the meeting as soon as possible at "The Common." He was almost ashamed to name the matter to them, but to his surprise the good folk expressed a great interest in the scheme, and were not at all inclined to shuffle it. In fact, as old Bottoms said in his sententious way: "We've gotten a grand chap—church, Mester Shuper, an' we mun show az we appreciate it, sir."

This was at the final trustees' meeting when the accounts had been presented, and the votes of thanks given to those who had borne the lion's share of the burden, a special resolution being sent to Higson. After all the regular business had been concluded, the super in a regretful, almost apologetic way, introduced the thing that was just then resting somewhat heavily upon his mind. Yes, they would go

into the subject at once, as far as unofficial suggestions were concerned at any rate. Names were mentioned of those who would make the most effective officers for the local fund, and a time was fixed for the holding of the meeting.

And then Blamires, the youngest trustee, had an inspiration, and suggested that as they had all worked together so harmoniously in this grand chapel building effort, and were all so proud of the finished work, they should have their names down on the roll together in the same order as they came in the trust deed. Coming from this juvenile and impetuous source the proposition was received with hesitation, but presently it seemed to catch their imaginations, and they insisted upon its being so.

The super, whose chief anxiety had been the fear that they would resent being appealed to again so soon, was only too glad to acquiesce, and so the meeting adjourned for a couple of days to enable the super to bring the roll that they might all sign it in order as agreed upon.

Just as they were leaving the vestry, old Bottoms made a loud exclamation of dismay, and then rising to his feet, for he was still sitting

at the far end of the room, he said mournfully :
“There’s one thing az you’ve forgot, Mester Shuper.”

“Indeed ! What’s that, Brother Bottoms ?”
and the super stepped up to the table.

“There’ll be one name missing.”

Everybody looked suddenly very sober, little sighs escaped them, and they glanced at each other in sorrow and disappointment. But the super’s train was due, and so he was compelled to ask them to think the matter over until the adjourned meeting should be held.

There was much debate and questioning amongst the trustees about what should be done in this difficulty. The more they thought of it, the more they liked the idea of all signing together, but the less likelihood did they see of getting the missing signature. Moreover, it occurred to one of them that it would look a very mean sort of thing to try and get Higson back, iust in order to get his subscription to the Million Scheme, and so nobody could suggest any way out of the difficulty, and the super could not help them.

The minister had informed them that as they

would all give more than the minimum amount, there was no reason why their names should not head the list of the Floxton Common contributions, though nobody had as yet named the sum he was intending to give, that being reserved for the great meeting in the church.

It took them half an hour, however, to make up their minds to enrol themselves in the absence of their estranged colleague, and at last it was decided that a line should be left blank for Higson in the hope that something might occur in the meantime to bring the wanderer back. Young Blamires signed readily, but old Bottoms, who was next, hesitated considerably, and then at last put down his pen, and in a tearful voice faltered: "I'll gi' me money, bud I don't want to be on if he isn't."

Whilst the old man was recovering himself and getting persuaded to do his part, the next man signed, and then the old fellow tremblingly followed. The next in order was Higson, and a blank space had to be left, and hard though it had been to sign before, it was much harder now with that blank line staring them in the face.

The super went home that night in a brown study ; whatever could he do to reach Higson ? for he felt that this effort would be shorn of nearly all its sweetness to the good people if Higson's name were not on the list, and they had really done so nobly that he coveted the pleasure of this reconciliation. And he got up next morning with the same feeling in his mind.

It took him an hour or so to dispose of his correspondence, but when that was done he drew the precious roll out of his safe and began to look once more at the names that had been signed the night before. In a moment or two it dawned upon him that that blank line looked very awkward indeed, and if it were not filled up it would be more eloquent than all the names that went before or came after. What a mistake he had made in allowing those whimsical trustees to have their fad. It would, perhaps, be the only blank line in the whole roll, and how strange it would look. Besides, he had a reputation for neatness and orderliness, and that would be there as a witness against him for ever.

The thing bothered him and then annoyed

him, and he was just sitting down in a sort of pet with himself when a blessed thought occurred to him. It was not absolutely necessary that a contributor should sign his own name. He liked Higson, and greatly valued him, both for his work and himself. He would keep his own counsel, and if nothing occurred to change the state of affairs, he would write Higson's name in himself and subscribe the extra guinea. He had a large family, and every shilling counted with him, but he would do that, whatever he had to sacrifice in other ways. The super was pleased with the idea, and pleased with himself for thinking of it, and he was just laughing at his own self-complacency, when a knock came at the study door and Brother Bottoms was announced.

The senior trustee shambled into the room in his characteristic manner, and shook hands limply with his ecclesiastical superior.

He took off his hat and placed it shyly on the floor by the side of his chair, and then, taking a red pocket-handkerchief out of the tail pocket of his antique black coat, he commenced: "I thought I would just call and pay

my Home Mission Fund collection, sir," and he fumbled in his pocket and produced a little wash-leather bag, from which he drew two half-crowns, which he placed in the minister's hand.

The super reached out a report, which serves in these cases as a receipt, and handed it to his visitor, wondering what was the old fellow's real reason for calling. Bottoms took the report without glancing at it, and then began to discuss the weather. The subject provided an interesting topic for a minute or two, for atmospheric conditions were just then very trying, and then there was an awkward pause.

"I see you've got the great roll there, Mr. Shuper," said Bottoms after a while, and he glanced round as though he would like to look at it.

The super opened it upon the desk, and the old man got up and carefully examined it inside and out. "H-u-m! Ha! wonderful dockyment, Mester Shuper. We must all have our names in that," and the minister noted that his visitor was looking very dreely at the blank space where Higson's signature should have been. He seemed to have nothing further

to say, however, and in a few moments rose to go.

"Well, good morning, sir, and thank you ; I hope you will get all the names you want," and then, just as he was going out of the door, "Oh! beg pardon," and he came back and drew out the wash-leather bag again. It took him some time to find what he wanted, but presently he pushed a sovereign and a shilling into the super's palm, saying as he did so: "Just put Higson's name down there, sir ; we can't have him off, you know," and before the minister could stop him he was gone.

The super was a little nonplussed and disappointed ; but Bottoms was better off than he was, and—well, they might make it two guineas perhaps. The same afternoon as he was going to his class he heard some one calling after him and turning round saw Waites, the corn factor hastening towards him.

Waites was always in a hurry, and on this occasion he appeared more than usually so. "Here, Mr. Super, take that. It's a fiver ; put it into that fund and drop Higson's name in, will you? Ah, here's the tram. Good day, sir."

The super was amused and touched ; it began to dawn upon him that Higson's contribution promised to be a pretty large one, if things went on like this, and when he got home that night another of the trustees was waiting for him. This man seemed to be entirely unable to tell what he had come about, but at last he blurted out :

"Mr. Super, I've come about Higson and that roll. He must be on, sir, he *must* ; he's done more for Methodism in this place than any other three of us, and his family is the oldest in the circuit. Why, his grandfather was at the opening of the first Methodist chapel there ever was in the Common."

But the super intended to keep his secret at least for the present, and so he said : "Yes, but we can't make the man contribute, you know."

"No, but we can do it for him, and we will ! I will ! Me ? Why, sir, he got me the first situation I ever had. He led me to the penitent form, he helped me to get my wife. He's injured his business to look after that chapel. *He* must be on, whoever else is."

"Well, but how are we to manage it? We've tried everything we could think of."

"Manage it! We *must* manage it. Look here, sir! I'll pay his share myself."

"But I've already got a guinea for him and——"

"A guinea! A guinea for the best man among us! Why, sir, it would be a sin and a shame for Higson's name to only represent a guinea. Look here, sir, it must be twenty at least! Yes, twenty! and I'll find it myself."

When he had gone the super told his wife, and she put on an air of confidence which was always rather aggravating to her husband, and said: "Neither your money nor anybody else's will be needed. Higson will put his own name in, you'll see."

At last the time for the holding of the Floxton Common meeting came, and the super told his colleagues that they must not be disappointed if the results were not what they might expect, as the "Common" people had really done so well that they couldn't do much more, however good their intentions.

As he had prophesied, the meeting was not

largely attended, and even he felt depressed as he noticed how few there were there who could give much. The chairman was a "Common" man, and started the meeting with a rousing, confident speech, which he crowned with a promise of fifty pounds.

The super stared from the speaker to his colleagues in amazement as the sum was named ; it was three times the amount he had expected. Then the resident minister spoke, and promised an outrageously extravagant sum for himself and wife and little ones. Then there was a pause, and presently old Bottoms rose to his feet. He had a mournful, melancholy tone with him, and always spoke at great length, but at last he announced that as the Lord had been so good to them in the chapel scheme, he could not give less than a hundred pounds.

The meeting applauded this to the echo, for Bottoms had a reputation for nearness. Then two or three more followed in a similar strain, until the poor super, scarcely knowing where he was, felt his eyes growing dim, and had to blow his nose. Then they sang a hymn, and were just sitting down again, when the man

who was acting as temporary chapel steward suddenly opened the inner door and threw up his arms with a gesture of wondering triumph, and the next moment who should walk into the chapel but Higson.

He was a short, ruddy man, and now looked redder than ever. He held his hat in his hand and gazed wonderingly about the chapel, which he had never seen since it was finished, and walked staggeringly up towards the front. Presently he stopped, his hat dropped out of his hand, and he lifted a red, agitated face towards the platform and cried :

“ I *had* to come, Mr. Super, I had to come ! I’ve been the wretchedest man in Floxton parish this last two months, but I couldn’t miss this. My father laid the foundation stone of the last chapel, and my grandfather was the first trustee of the oldest chapel of all. Everything I have I owe to this Church, and my own bairns have been converted here. I’ve heard what you are thinking of doing with my name, and that brought me here to-night, that killed my pride. God forgive me. Put me down for a hundred pounds, Mr. Super, if I’m not too bad, and I’ll

sit in the free seats if you'll let me come again."

The meeting was some time before it got composed, and then the subscriptions began to roll in faster than ever.

That night, after Higson had been down to the manse and signed the roll, the super repeated once more his old saying, that the Floxton people were the strangest people he had ever travelled amongst, but this time he added, "and the best."

A COSTLY CONTRIBUTION

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A COSTLY CONTRIBUTION

TWO elderly ladies sat by the fire in a comfortably furnished room, the walls of which were adorned with steel engravings of scenes in the lives of the Wesleys, Centenary gatherings, and a large photograph of the first lay representative Conference. The one seated in the low modern armchair on the side nearest the window was small and thin, with white hair and fair skin, and cheeks like old china. She had a meek, Quaker-like look about her, and her dress was of plain silver grey.

The other one was taller than her sister and dark, and had a masculine mouth, at the corners of which there were lines which had been left by bygone storms. She was reading the newly arrived *Methodist Recorder*, and there was a

disappointed, almost peevish look on her face, and presently she threw the paper from her with an impatient jerk, and as it fluttered to the hearthrug she shaded her face with her hand and gazed moodily into the fire. Her soft-eyed little sister glanced concernedly at her once or twice, sighed a little, and then asked gently : " Anybody dead, love ? "

" No ; nobody we know. "

Another slight pause, and then in a caressing tone : " Anybody married ? "

" No. "

" Any news about Hanster ? "

" No. "

The little Quakeress's knitting seemed to trouble her just then and her thin, almost transparent hands shook a little as she fumbled for the dropped stitch. In a moment, however, she lifted her head and asked coaxingly : " Is there nothing interesting, love ? "

Miss Hannah dropped the hand that covered her eyes, glanced petulantly round the room and then answered pensively : " Susan, there's one thing in that paper and one only. "

The head of the meek little woman opposite

to her was bent over her knitting, the pearly cheek paled a little, and then she asked : "And that, love ?"

"That paper has got nothing in it but Twentieth Century ; it is Twentieth Century first page and Twentieth Century last, and Twentieth Century all the way through. Oh, that we should have lived to see this day !"

"Hannah !"

"I mean it, Susan ;" and the excited woman began to rock herself in an increasing grief. "There was a Branscombe who entertained Mr. Wesley, there have been Branscombes in every great movement our Church has seen ; our father sat in the first Lay Conference and we both subscribed to the Thanksgiving Fund ourselves. And now that our Church is doing the noblest thing she ever did we shall be out of it. Oh, that we had gone before it came !"

"No, no, love, not so bad as that ; we can give our guinea each, and—and one in memory of our dear father, ah—with a little more economy."

"Guineas ! Branscombes giving single guineas ! Our dear father down on that great historic roll for a guinea ! Susan, how can

you? what will the village think? And the Hanster people, and father's old Conference friends? They might suspect something! We cannot think of it for a moment."

Miss Hannah had risen to her feet during her speech, but now, with a fretful, half-indignant gesture, she sank back into her chair and once more covered her face with her hands.

Little Miss Susan stole anxious, sympathetic glances across the room for a moment or two, and then, letting her knitting slide down upon her footstool, she stepped softly to the side of her sister's chair, and, bending over and pressing her delicate cheek against Miss Hannah's darker one, she murmured soothingly

"And if some things I do not ask,
In my cup of blessing be;
I would have my spirit filled the more
With grateful love to Thee,
And careful less to serve Thee much
Than to please Thee perfectly."

As these lines were repeated the face of Miss Hannah softened, the shadow upon it gradually disappeared, and in the pause that followed a gentle light came into her black eyes. She

bent forward and silently kissed the dear face that was still bent over her, and then said impulsively :

“Bless you, love! What have I done to deserve such a sweet comforter? But I *should* like to have done one more good thing for God and our Church before I go to heaven.”

“Never mind, dearest! When we get to heaven the Master will perhaps say to us as He said to David.”

“What was that?”

“Thou didst well that it was in thine heart.”

Now, the father of these two ladies had been a prosperous, well-to-do Methodist layman of Connexional repute, but when he died it was discovered that all his means were in his business, and that he had really saved very little. His funeral was attended by great numbers of Methodist magnates, lay and clerical, from all parts of the country, and the respect shown to their father's memory had been a sweet consolation to the bereaved sisters.

But whilst they were receiving the written and spoken sympathies of many friends, the family lawyer was expressing himself *to* himself in language that was to say the least very unparliamentary. Branscombe's business was certainly a lucrative one, and whilst he was there to attend to it all was well; but the man who spent or gave away all his income, when he had two daughters unprovided for was, in the lawyer's judgment, more fool than saint, and he ground his teeth savagely when he discovered that he would have to explain to the sorrowing women that they would have to change their style of life.

There was nothing else for it, however. The business would have to be carried on, for it was not the sort of thing that would realise much when sold. A manager would therefore have to be paid, and when that was done there would not be very much left for the two ladies who had always been brought up in such comfort.

Lawyer Bedwell had no patience with men who left their affairs like that, and in spite of himself, some of his feeling on the point

slipped out upon his first interview with his fair clients.

When he had gone, their minds were occupied with one thought only. It was clear that Mr. Bedwell thought their father blameworthy in the matter, and if he did others would be of the same opinion. But they knew as no one else did, how true and noble a parent they had lost, and at all costs they were determined that nothing should be done that would excite suspicion in the minds of their friends. Appearances, therefore, must be kept up, and everything must go on as usual; all their father's subscriptions must be continued, and their home must still be the chief house of entertainment in Hanster.

But as time went on these things became more and more difficult. Nearly half the profits of the business had to go to pay a manager; but, as he was not Mr. Branscombe and the concern had depended largely upon the personal effort and influence of its chief, there was a serious annual shrinkage, in spite of all that Lawyer Bedwell could do to prevent it. Then the manager precipitated a crisis by absconding

with some hundreds of pounds, and the legal adviser to the firm was compelled to recommend that the business be sold and that the ladies should reduce their establishment, so as to be able to live upon what was left.

For their own sakes this might easily have been done, but for their father's they could not think of it. At last, however, they decided to leave the little town where they had been born, and where all their interests centred, and go into some quiet village, where they might live cheaply, and do in a smaller way the kind of work their father had done in Hanster.

And so they came to Pumphrey, where they were regarded as very great people indeed, and where their now reduced contributions were received as most munificent donations. But the habits of a lifetime are not easily unlearned, and so, finding that the memory of their father was still fragrant in Pumphrey, and that the simple inhabitants of the village were ready to give them all the respect and deference due to their antecedents, they were soon acting in the old open-handed way; and whilst the little

circuit in which the village was situate rejoiced in and boasted of their generosity, the poor ladies were constantly over-reaching themselves and lived in a condition of chronic impecuniosity.

Their personal expenses were pared down until they could be reduced no further, but the large-hearted liberality to which they had always been accustomed and which regard for their father's memory seemed to demand, was continued as far as possible. Recently, however, Miss Susan had had a severe illness, and this, with the heavy doctor's bill it involved, had reduced them still further, and the announcement of the Twentieth Century Fund found them in the worst possible condition for doing their duty to it.

The long pensive silence that fell upon the sisters after Miss Susan's last remark was broken presently by a knock at the door, and Jane their faithful, if somewhat unmanageable, domestic brought in the supper. Placing the little tray containing hot milk and thin bread and butter on the table, she picked up the *Methodist Recorder* and somewhat ostentatiously

proceeded to put it away in the homemade rack at the side of the fireplace.

"You can take the paper with you, Jane," said Miss Hannah.

"I dooan't want it, mum," answered Jane gruffly, and in broadest Yorkshire.

"You don't want it, Jane! Why, it is full of news this week, all about the Twentieth Century Fund, you know."

"That's just it, mum! that theer fund I caan't abear! It's gotten hup out o' pride an' pomp an' vanity, that's wot it is, an it'll niver prosper, mark my wods!"

"Jane!"

I meean it, mum! Thank goodness, nooan a my muncy 'ull gooa ta sitchan a thing, an' bi wot I can hear ther's nooan o' t' villigers gooin' ta give nowt neeither."

"But, Jane——"

But before Miss Hannah could stop her, Jane had burst forth again: "It's nowt bud pride, an wickidness, mum, it's woss nor that king as showed his treasures to that Babshakkle, an' as fur that theer rowl, it's King Daavid numberin' Hisrael, that's wot it is."

“But, Jane, we must all——”

“Yes, mum, that’s wot you allas says, beggin’ your pardon, bud it’s my belief you ladies ’ud subscribe ta buyin’ t’ moon if t’ Conference wanted it; bud I’m different, an’ if I hed my waay not a penny ’ud goa oot o’ this house ta that Million Fund.”

As the privileged and outspoken Jane closed the door behind her, the two ladies looked at each other with astonishment, for Jane was as stout a supporter of all things Methodistic as they were, and they had difficulty sometimes in restraining her liberality.

To Miss Hannah, however, their old servant’s words were more disturbing than to her mild sister. She did all the business of the establishment and had charge of the purse, and she had privately resolved in spite of her querulous words to her sister that, if the worst came to the worst, she would do as she had been driven to do once or twice before and get a temporary loan from Jane; but, if Jane disapproved of the fund, there might be difficulty, for nothing was concealed from her, and, in fact, she had more to do with the financial arrangements

of the little family. than even Miss Hannah herself.

Meanwhile Jane, who was short and plump with bright black eyes and black hair, had made her way back into the kitchen, where sat a ruddy-looking man of about thirty, dressed like a gardener, and whose face wore an injured, protesting expression whilst he leaned forward propping his elbows on his knees and nervously twirling his cap round with his hands. He glanced sulkily up from under his brows as Jane entered the kitchen, and furtively watched her as she picked up a wash-leather and resumed her work at the plate basket.

The gardener gave his cap a fierce extra twirl and then grumbled: "Ther niver wur nooabody humbugged like me; this is t' fowert (fourth) time I've been putten off."

Jane gave an ominous sniff; her plump face hardened a little, but she never spoke.

"It's t' Million Fund an' t' Mississes an' onnybody afoor me."

The spoon Jane was rubbing was flung into the basket with a peevish rattle, and rising to her feet and stepping to the rug before the

fire she said indignantly: "John Craake, hev sum sense, wilta? Here I've been telling lies like a good 'un i' t' parlour till I can hardly bide mysen, an' noo I mun cum back ta be aggravaated bi thee. Them owd haangils i' t' parlour 'ud sell t' frocks offen ther backs ta subscribe ta this fund, an' thou sits theer talkin' about weddins an sitch like floppery. I wunder thou isn't ashaamed o' thisen."

John sat ruminating dolefully for a moment or two, and then he wiped his nose with the back of his hand and said with sulky resignation: "Well, what mun I dew then?"

"Dew? thou mun cum i' t' morning an' saay thi saay to 'em, an' if that weean't dew, thou mun *waait*, that's what thou mun dew."

Now John had been courting Jane in a dogged sort of way almost ever since the Branscombes came to Pumphrey, but until recently he had made little apparent progress. Some few months before the time of which we write, however, a terrible burglary with murderous incidents had taken place in the neighbourhood, and as the news greatly upset the old ladies and made them declare that they would

never be able to stay in the house unless they could have a man about the place, Jane had made a virtue of necessity and accepted her lover, on the understanding that he was to come and live in the house, and never suggest any other arrangement so long as the old ladies lived.

John had eagerly agreed ; but, though the wedding had been fixed now three times, it had so far been put off again and again, because, as John eventually discovered, the money which Jane with a Yorkshire woman's thrifty ideas felt was absolutely necessary for a decent woman's wedding, had been sacrificed to the needs of her mistresses.

And now it had seemed that the happy event was really to come off, and just at the last minute, so to speak, this Million Scheme had turned up, and Jane insisted that before her spare cash was spent on such a frivolous thing as getting married she must be sure that it was not wanted to enable her mistresses to subscribe to the fund as became the daughters of Thomas Branscombe. For Jane, be it said, was as jealous for the honour of her old master as

his daughters. She was, moreover, a Methodist of the Methodists, and had upon the first announcement of the fund decided that it was her duty to give at least five pounds to so glorious an object.

This idea, however, she now abandoned, and whilst she consented to try and persuade her mistresses not to think of subscribing and had agreed that John should use his powers of persuasion in the same direction, she knew but too well that the dear old souls she worshipped would insist upon taking their part in the great movement, and therefore the money she intended to have given for herself and the money needed for the approaching wedding would all be required for the old ladies' subscription. And, even if the sisters themselves could be talked over, she still felt that their names ought to be on the roll and that it was her duty to get them on, even if she had to do it unknown to them, and pay the subscriptions herself.

Next morning, therefore, John did his best to convince the ladies that nobody thereabouts cared anything for the fund, and that it would be useless to hold a meeting in the village for

the purpose. Encouraged by Miss Hannah's manner as he respectfully argued with her, he even suggested that she should write to the super advising him not to think of holding a meeting in Pumphrey. Jane, however, when he told her what he had said in the parlour, was worse than sceptical, and insisted on him as a leader writing to the super himself.

A post or two later, however, a reply came to say that the meeting was fixed for the following Thursday night, and that Pumphrey surely would not be behind other places. John hastened to Pear Tree Cottage to tell the news as soon as he got the letter; but on entering the kitchen he was interrupted in his story by the alarming information that Miss Susan had been taken ill in the night, and he must hasten away for the doctor.

The Thursday night came, and the super, alarmed and disappointed at not seeing "The Ladies" at the meeting, discovered on enquiry that Miss Susan was confined to her room, and that the doctor's report was not encouraging. The good man therefore came round on his way

home, and Miss Hannah came down from the sick-room to speak to him.

Her report of the condition of the patient was so discouraging, and she herself looked so sad, that the good pastor forgot all about the meeting and was just saying good-night when Miss Hannah said: "I was sorry we missed the meeting but" (with hesitation and embarrassment) "of course we shall send our subscription."

"Send it? But you did send it, Miss Branscombe."

"No! but we will do; it will be all right, Mr. Makinson."

"But you did send it, excuse me, and a very nice one it is. See, here it is," and the minister pulled out a small roll of papers and spread the top one out upon the table.

Miss Hannah with a puzzled look bent over the good man's shoulder and read, whilst tears came into her sad eyes as she recognised the clumsy writing:—

	£	s.	d.
Thomas Branscombe, Esq. (in Memoriam)	5	5	0
Miss Susannah Wesley Branscombe . . .	5	5	0
Miss Hannah More Branscombe . . .	5	5	0
Jane Twizel	1	1	0

Miss Hannah turned away with a choking sob, and the super, embarrassed and perplexed, took a hasty departure.

In the small hours of the next morning, as Miss Hannah sat musing by the sick-room fire, a gentle voice called her to the bedside.

"What is it, love?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh, Hannah, love, isn't God good? I said He would find a way and He has done—better than we can ask or think."

"Yes, love! of course, love; but what do you mean?"

"The fund, you know, the great fund; we shall do it, you see, after all. Oh, *isn't* He good?"

"Yes, love, of course."

But Miss Hannah's voice showed that she did not quite understand, and so with a bright smile the gentle sufferer explained faintly: "The insurance, you know; it is for whichever of us dies first."

"Dies?" cried Miss Hannah, in sudden distress; "you are not dying, love. Oh, no! You mustn't leave me alone."

But the sufferer evidently did not hear.

Presently she murmured almost inaudibly :
“ There will be plenty of money for you now, love, and the Branscombes will have an honourable place on the roll, and whilst the money will be making the world sweeter and better we shall be at rest.”

Two days later the gentle soul slipped away and was laid by her father's side in the Hanster chapel-yard, and shortly after the Million Scheme was enriched by a contribution of a hundred pounds, “ In loving memory of a noble father and a sainted sister in heaven.”

Poor John Crake is still waiting, though somewhat more hopefully, to be allowed to act as a protection against burglars at Pear Tree Cottage.

THE ALDERMAN'S CONVERSION

VI

THE ALDERMAN'S CONVERSION

"**S**ORRY, Mr. Super, but I cannot take the chair, and as for my name heading the circuit list, I don't intend it to be there at all."

"Mr. Alderman, I'm astonished! You of all men! Why, everybody is looking to you to lead the way."

"Can't help it, sir; the fact is, I don't approve of the scheme at all."

The super was amazed, and most undisguisedly disappointed.

"What! What is your objection to it, sir?"

And the alderman leaned back a little farther into his Russian leather armchair, puffed out a volume of smoke from his cigar, twitched

up the tightened knee of his trousers, and then drawled with an assumption of coolness he did not quite feel :

“ It appears to me, sir, that this whole movement is an attempt to endow our departments, and as a—a—conscientious Radical I object to all endowments.”

The good super proceeded to explain, and from explanation he passed on to argument and from argument to pleading ; but the alderman held his ground, and the minister went away with astonishment and dismay in his heart.

Lert alone in his office, Joseph Carfax put his legs upon a chair and gave himself up to meditation, in which the minister and the Twentieth Century Fund were soon forgotten. The alderman was a successful man of business, who had risen from the ranks, and whilst yet in the prime of life had reached a comfortable competence. He was also one of the most prominent public men in the ancient borough of Knibworth, and it was confidently stated that he might have the mayoralty any time he liked. Hitherto, however, he had declined the

honour, chiefly because he was anxious when he did occupy the civic chair to excel his predecessors as much in munificence as he was able to do in eloquence. He had a large and expensive family and many calls upon his liberality, but he was now beginning to feel that if not next year, certainly the year after, he would be able to do himself the honour of accepting the dignity which had already more than once been offered him.

As will have been seen already, Carfax was a Wesleyan and had been for years a most acceptable local preacher. In his earlier life, when he was an obscure man, he had been very popular and very much in demand; but of late his appointments had been reduced to an occasional half-day at the circuit chapel, and he scarcely ever went into the villages to preach except on anniversary days, when his liberal contributions to the collection were more eagerly looked for than his services in the pulpit. He was trustee of several chapels and had held every office his Church could offer to laymen, not excepting that of Conference representative. For some years now he had been the chief layman of the

Knibworth circuit, and was known throughout the district as a generous, broad-minded sympathiser with every good movement.

Of late, however, he had been conscious that the ardour of his early days had left him, and that he was not by any means as enthusiastic a Methodist as he used to be. As he mixed more with men of all kinds his ideas had got broadened he told himself, and he was compelled to admit that the nonsuch Methodism of his earlier life did not quite satisfy his maturer tastes. The ministers they had now were not quite the same sort of men as those with whom he had been so very friendly in those days gone by, and the laymen with whom he associated at the chapel were not exactly his style. His family was growing up, too, and he began to discover how very little society there was for his sons and daughters in the Knibworth Methodist circles.

His wife had complained more than once recently that there were scarcely any young people in the chapel with whom their children could associate, and none with whom she would like them to marry. And he felt that his wife

was right, although he had pooh-poohed her remark at the time ; really when he came to think of it, a man in his position had to make many social sacrifices, if he continued faithful to the Church of his choice. He governed his family upon what he called " modern principles," and allowed his children great liberality, both of speech and action. His growing discontent with his Church had found expression of late in severe criticisms of sermons and half-concealed sneers at the officials of the Church ; but he was surprised and for the moment disturbed when he discovered that his children entertained similar views, and assumed a tolerant, contemptuous air towards all things Methodistic.

Recently also two of the young people had taken to going to church occasionally, making their love of music the excuse ; and only the other day his boy Fred had been invited to join the choir of St. Margaret's.

To crown all, his wife had hinted to him a day or two ago that there *was* something between their eldest daughter Emily and young Pearson, the son of one of his brother aldermen.

Well, after all, what right had he to expect

that his children would be Methodists because he had always been one? Hadn't they as much right to choose for themselves as he had? It would be a grand thing for Emily, if she did marry young Pearson, and it would be a shame for him to put anything in her way. Perhaps if he became mayor it would help the matter, for the Pearsons were a proud lot. Yes, that was what he must do, he must take the chief magistracy next year, and if he did, there would be no money to spare either for this Million Scheme or any other merely Methodist matter.

Just as he had reached this conclusion the office door opened, and in sauntered an old man. He was evidently very much at home in the place, and nodded familiarly to the alderman as he entered. He was short and thin and very straight; he wore an old-fashioned semi-clerical suit of black, tinged here and there with brown spots, the result of snuff-taking.

"Hello, dad! pay day again?" And the alderman rose hastily from his reclining position and, drawing up to his desk, began to take out his cheque-book.

The visitor was Carfax's father, an old local preacher who lived by himself and was maintained in very generous fashion by his only son.

"Yes, my lad, the old amount," he said playfully, as he came towards the desk; "but I want something else to-day."

"Hello! what's up now?" cried the alderman, turning round and smiling. "Not going to get married again, father?"

The old man grinned, for this was an old joke. "No, my lad, it's that Twentieth Century Fund, you know."

Carfax laid down his pen, and turning quickly round, cried: "But, father, you are not going in for that, surely."

"Am I not? but I am! And why not?"

"I don't believe in it, father. You can do what you like and have as much as you like, but I've made up my mind that I shall not give a penny to it."

The old man's jaw dropped in dismay. He looked amazedly at his son for a moment, took a great pinch of snuff without ever removing his eyes from the alderman, and then gasped out:

"Thou's wandering, my lad."

It was a sure sign that he was excited when old John Carfax "thoued" his son.

"Wandering or not, I mean it. I'll supply you with as much as you like, with pleasure ; but not a penny will I give myself."

"But, my lad, my lad ! it's for Methodism, our blessed Methodism !"

"Methodism ! What's Methodism ? It's no better than any other Church that I know of."

"Joseph !" and in his extreme distress the old man dropped his snuff-box, and coming up to the desk and taking his son by the arm he went on, "Joseph, my lad ! my lad ! why, Methodism has been ivverything to uz."

"Don't see it, father ; I don't see it at all."

The old man's arm was still upon his son's shoulder, and, as he stood gazing up into the hard but handsome face of his only living relative, he asked with eager, tremulous distress : "Joseph, hev'n't I heard thee say at anniversaries 'at thou hed the best mother i' England ?"

"Yes, an' I had, too ; but what of that ?"

"That mother was saved from a bad family and a bad life by Methodism ; and thy owd

father was turned from a gamblin' skittle-player to a local preacher by Methodism ; an' all 'at's good in thee thou got fro' Methodism. Oh, Joseph ! how *can* thou talk like that ? ”

Carfax was moved somewhat, and so, promising to think of it, he put the old man off, and as soon as he had gone tried to forget the words he had heard in the public duties in which he was so much interested. But again and again at the Watch Committee that night the old man's look came back into his mind, and even when he got to the club he could not shake off the impression that had been made on him, and so he went home earlier than usual. He had just finished supper and was immersed in some corporation returns when the dining-room door opened, and in burst Dick, his third and most excitable son.

“ Oh, dad ! I've been to such a jolly meeting ! Went over to call on the Brigdens on my bike. They were just going out to a meeting, so I went with them and heard Perks. My stars, didn't he make a rippin' speech ! ”

Carfax glanced round indolently and asked : “ Missionary meeting, was it ? ”

"Missionary! No! it was about this Million Scheme. Hay, I did feel proud that our Church was such a grand one." And then he broke off: "I say, dad, why don't we take in the Methodist papers? The Brigdens knew all about it, and there was I as ignorant as a noodle."

Carfax felt a reproachful little pang, and was just turning again to his returns when his impetuous son broke out once more:

"Oh, it *was* a speech! Why, dad, I never knew that ours was such a grand Church. Oh, wasn't I proud I was a Methodist, I can tell you!"

Carfax winced and was just about to speak when a little flaxen-haired maiden, the saint of the family as her eldest brother called her, got up from the sofa where she had been reclining, and stealing to her brother's side, put her white arms upon his shoulder and said softly: "I hope you will be a *real* Methodist some day, dear."

Later the same evening the alderman had a somewhat serious conversation with his wife. He was going to tell her what he had decided

to do with regard to the Million Scheme and what he had said to the super whom Mrs. Carfax did not particularly like ; but before he could commence she began to confide to him her apprehensions as to their eldest son, who was in business in London ; and the details she supplied, and the dark pictures which, with motherly anxiety, she painted, made Carfax very uncomfortable.

When she had gone to bed he fell into troubled musings. He could not forget what his father had said to him that day, and the light words of the excitable Dick somehow stuck to him ; but this news about Edmund in London was worst of all, and sank deepest. True, most of what the mother had said had been mere surmisings ; but he felt how easily they and much more might be true, and before he was aware of it the alderman, who had of late dropped into the habit of mentally minimising the favourite Methodist doctrine of conversion, found himself wishing, with a deep sigh, that his eldest boy had been converted before he went to London. He would give a thousand pounds at that very moment to know

that his boy was a genuine Christian ; but there seemed no hope of that, and his other children seemed likely to become nominal Christians at most, and to drift into other Churches. And for the next half-hour—the deeper manhood of Joseph having fairly awakened—gave him a torturing experience.

But next morning he felt inclined to laugh at his fears of the night before, and was no more inclined than ever to depart from the path upon which he had entered.

But circumstances were against the alderman, for when he got home to dinner he found that two of his children, Dick the irrepressible, and Kathy the saint, had been down to grandfather's and borrowed the *Recorder* and had also called at the railway bookstall and got the *Methodist Times*, and were now fuller than ever of the wonderful fund.

When grandfather came in a little while afterwards they of course received powerful reinforcement, and though the two eldest children who were at home treated the matter rather contemptuously, they could not altogether resist the influences of the moment, and were soon

almost as much interested as the younger ones.

On the following Sunday it was announced that the Million Scheme meeting for Knibworth would be held on the Thursday week following ; but no chairman's name was mentioned. Literature of various kinds was also found in the pews and carried home, and Carfax during the afternoon noticed some very mysterious calculations going on with lead pencils, and his wife told him as he went to bed that, good Sunday though it was, Dick and Kathy had been reckoning up what sundry inmates of the house owed them.

Carfax began to feel really ashamed of himself, and told himself reluctantly that the enthusiasm of his children, the younger end of them at any rate, was a direct reproach to him ; at the same time he was conscious of a curious feeling of relief and thankfulness in the thought, that some at least of his family would by this fund become more firmly attached to their father's Church.

During the week the super called again, and tried to induce his most influential layman to

take the chair at the circuit meeting. But Carfax still held out, though more from a foolish scruple about consistency than anything else ; and the minister went away resolved to try once more before the eventful day came.

Of late Carfax had fallen into the habit of once-a-day worship, and so he stayed at home on the following Sunday evening. And there, by his own fireside, he got thinking once more of his cherished plans, and was surprised to find that they did not seem so beautiful as they had done before. And then he was drawn to think again of his whole life, and especially of his recent attitude towards the Church in which, as he could not but acknowledge, he had got all his good. Then he wandered off into remembrances of the happy days when he was young and struggling, and of the blessed weariness he used to feel after a hard day's preaching in the country. After all, those were happy days, and he was not so sure that he was not a better man then than now, in spite of his J. P. and municipal and other honours.

Then his father's words in the office came back to him, and he was just choking back a

lump in his throat when the dining-room door burst open and a fairy form flung itself upon him, a hot cheek was pressed against his, and a bright eager voice cried: "Oh, father, father! what *do* you think? Oh, I am so happy! so very very happy!"

"Whatever's the matter, child?"

"Oh, father! dear father, Dick's just told me such a secret! such a beautiful secret."

"And you are letting it all out! What is it, you whirlwind?"

"Oh, father, Dick's just told me he is going to join Mr. Jimpson's class. Isn't it grand, father, glorious?"

Carfax felt he was giving way. The slumbering Methodism in him was all at once awaking and swallowing up the alderman, and almost to his own surprise he muttered fervently: "Thank God."

It was many a long day since Carfax had had a religious conversation with one of his children, but that night he took young Dick into the study and asked him what Kathy's strange story meant.

Dick was frankness itself, and the alderman's

heart grew warm and his eyes moist as he listened to his own boy telling the old story that he once used to hear so often.

"Well, my dear lad, it's the best news I've heard for many a day. God bless you, and make you a true Christian and a true and faithful Methodist. Ah—there's one thing I should like you to do, however."

"What's that, father?"

"I should like you to write to Edmund before you go to bed, and tell him what has taken place."

On the Wednesday following, when the family came down to breakfast, there was a letter lying on Master Dick's plate, and the alderman who saw it first felt somehow as if he would like to open it.

Kathy also looked at it with longing eyes, for the absent brother was her special favourite.

Presently Dick came down and opened his letter. He had dressed hastily and was not too much awake even now; but as he read the note his eyes opened and a bright light came into them, and suddenly he flung the letter into the air, and cried: "Hurrah! I mean, Praise the Lord."

"What! What is it?" cried two or three at once.

In a moment little Kathy had slipped from her place at the table and picked up the letter, which had fluttered down upon the hearthrug. "Listen! listen!" she cried, with shining eyes and radiant face, and whilst the rest looked at her eagerly she read:

"DEAR DICK,—Thank God for the news you send me; it is the best I have had for many a long day. May the Lord keep you faithful! You may be surprised that I write like this, but as you have told me *your* happiness I will tell you mine. I have not been very good, I am sorry to say, since I came to London; but a fortnight ago a friend asked me to go to St. James's Hall. I went, and what I heard there changed my life; and that very night I gave my heart to God. Please tell them *all*, but *especially dear little Kathy*. With much love,

"Your affectionate Brother,

"EDMUND."

"And the £250,000 for Hugh Price Hughes' work was my special aversion," said the

alderman to himself, as he went down to his office ; and when the super called an hour later he found his hitherto obdurate layman in a very kindly frame of mind. The next evening the chair was taken by Joseph Carfax after all, and the fame of the Knibworth contribution has gone forth into the whole Church.

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